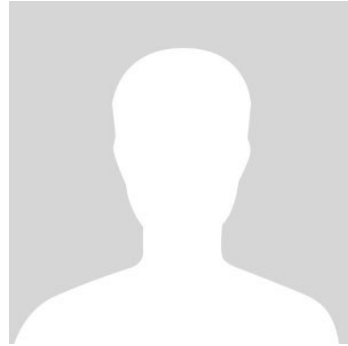


# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Sidney Fiske Kimball's American Architecture*

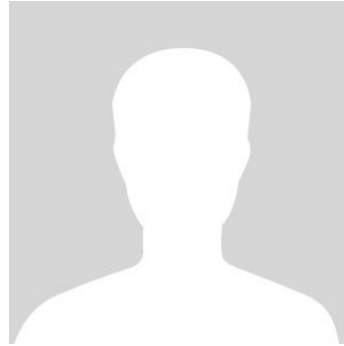
### Participants:



#### Host

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### Links and References:

#### Bibliograph and Related Online Content

Brown, Adrienne. "Erecting the Skyscraper, Erasing Rase" in Cheng, Irene, Charles L. Davis II, and Mabel O. Wilson, eds. 2020. *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press. Pages 203-217.

Kimball, Fiske. 1928. *American Architecture*. Indianapolis & New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers.

Landscape Architecture Magazine. 1928. "Review." Review of *American Architecture*, by Fiske Kimball. Full quote: "His book recognizes both the body and the soul of architecture, and sets all forth so that a person of ordinary intelligence can both understand and enjoy." The same issue contains a review of *The American Architecture of To-Day* by G.H. Edgell, which appears next to the review of Kimball's book. For the purposes of differentiating the content and scope of Edgell's work from Kimball's, the review of Edgell's work includes the following description of *American Architecture*: "Mr. Kimball's book is a brief, vivid, philosophical interpretation of the whole of American architecture from its beginnings..." (329).

Scully, Vincent. 1969. *American Architecture and Urbanism*. New York: Praeger.

Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (4): 387–409.

The concept of native elimination is articulated by historian Patrick Wolfe. Wolfe argues that settler colonial progress and success relies on removal of indigenous peoples and culture.

#### More on History

For intrepid and exciting thinkers on practices of writing history today, we can recommend *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* by Ariella Azoulay (2019 Verso Books).

#### More on Sidney Fiske Kimball

Sidney Fiske Kimball was trained as an Architect at Harvard University, and received a PhD at University of Michigan in 1915 with his dissertation "Thomas Jefferson and the first monument of the classical revival in America." He worked as an architectural historian, preservationist, and a long time museum

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director at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Related online sources include:

1. University of Michigan Biography of Sidney Fiske Kimball:  
<http://faculty-history.dc.umich.edu/faculty/sidney-fiske-kimball>
2. Archive of Sidney Fiske Kimball at Harvard:  
<https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/19/resources/1170>
3. Monticello's Biography of Sidney Fiske Kimball:  
[monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/fiske-kimball](http://monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/fiske-kimball)

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## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Sidney Fiske Kimball's American Architecture*

### Transcript

#### Introduction

"Among a people with the vast material task of conquering the wilderness of a continent, mastering the richness of its soil, its forests, its waters and mountains, artistic expression takes chiefly the form of building, of architecture. It is in architecture, of all of the arts, that America has said best what it has had to say. It is in architecture that America, grown to imperial might, has said something new and vital in art."

It is with this depiction of Americans conquering the wilderness that Fiske Kimball starts his history of American architecture. The book, titled *American Architecture*, constructs a progressive narrative of the mutual development of American civilization and architectural form. Published in 1928, this text sought to encapsulate this "new and vital art" in its evolution from the founding of European colonies in North America to the beginning of the twentieth century. The author, Sidney Fiske Kimball was trained as an architect at Harvard University and received a PhD at the University of Michigan in 1915, before working as an architectural historian, preservationist, and a longtime director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

*American Architecture* was among a wave of 1920s texts that sought to situate and define what counted as American in architecture. It was framed by a peer reviewer at the time as "recognizing the body and soul of architecture," but half a century later the book was described by Vincent Scully as merely "a reflection of Beaux Arts attitudes." The themes of race, capitalism, labor, and settler colonialism that run throughout the text but are not named, as well as the groups and typologies that Kimball chose to include and leave out, illustrate the unmentioned but powerful forces that shaped American architecture and critics' perceptions of it.

I'm Jeremy Wolin, and I'm Carrie Bly, and as two PhD students in the History and Theory of Architecture at Princeton University, we look to Kimball's *American Architecture* to explore what it means for us to construct, or perhaps reconstruct, a history of American architecture.

#### A White Origin Story

Let's begin this exploration by looking at how Kimball chooses to structure this history and what he lays as its foundation. Just taking a look at how Kimball organized his chapters is quite revealing of which influences and forces Kimball thought contributed to the development of American architecture. Of the sixteen chapters in the book, the first six focus on the influences and typologies within colonial America. This is the foundation. Then, the following ten build on this foundation by taking a largely chronological path through the stylistic developments that emerged from the American Revolution through to the time of the book's publication in the early twentieth century.

Because this second section, which takes up the majority of the book, is so chronologically oriented, it's particularly interesting that Kimball goes out of order in this first section on colonial America. Let's take a closer look at how he lays this foundation.

If you know a little about early American history, you know that the Spanish and the French arrived in North America and established settlements prior to the British, but Kimball places them and their architecture at the very end, in chapter six of his six-chapter origin story of colonial American Architecture, under the title of "Spanish and French Outposts."

This situates England, and to some extent other nations of Northern Europe, as the real ancestors of Kimball's American architectural history, making a subtle differentiation between white Europeans.

Another important effect of this misordering is that it shunts the only real reference to the influence of indigenous peoples on American architecture to the very end of the foundational sequence: Kimball flatly states that the Spanish [quote] "built in the manner of the Indians, of adobe and of sun-dried brick, with flat roofs of clay on crude wooden beams projecting through the walls."

In contrast, the influence of indigenous peoples on architecture in the English colonies was silenced. This was purposeful by Kimball and in contrast to other authors of the time. He writes of the English wigwams at Jamestown and Plymouth that they were: "by no means like those of the Indians, as some have thought." Although he does not specify where the English learned to build these structures if not from observing native architecture.

At this censorship in Kimball's text, we might look at *American Architecture* through a lens of settler colonialism. This is a concept of native elimination argued by historian Patrick Wolfe, that relies on removal of indigenous peoples and culture to make way for the settler; by negating any indigenous presence in the English wigwam, Kimball makes the English seem to be indigenous to the Americas themselves.

Looking closer at the English colonies then, it is also interesting to note how much space Kimball gives to the Northeast, and specifically New England. Slavery gets almost no mention in either the North nor South, save for a passing reference to "the humble quarters of the blacks" in Chapter 5: Provincial

#### Types of the Seaboard.

This absence makes sense alongside the settler colonial reading of this text. Slaves, enslavers, and the indigenous people are not early Americans for Kimball's purposes. His Americans are "a few gentlefolk," and a majority of "yeomen, tenants, or farm laborers," for whom the defining feature of the America they encountered was, in Kimball's words, "a boon of free land," that offered them a "frontier of ownership." Only these morally righteous white male settlers were the roots of Kimball's American architecture.

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Sidney Fiske Kimball's American Architecture*

### Competition feeding Capitalism

Now that we've examined Kimball's foundation for American architectural history, we can turn to the upper ten stories of the book that assert a stylistic evolution.

The dominant theme in these chapters is an ongoing competition, or struggle, or war between a series of styles and the architects who represent them. This battle is the driving force for the remainder of the book. Each chapter details a struggle between two warring styles, in which often one succeeds and becomes the dominant style of the following era.

The competition begins with a rivalry between two revivals: Classical and Romantic. Which would become the architecture of the new republic? In Kimball's words, the "Battle of the Styles was on."

This battle only ends in the total splintering of these styles into multiple factions: Roman and Greek, Gothic and Romanesque.

As new building technology, commercialism and industrial society reshapes architecture, a second dichotomy is set up in the late 1800s. Here Kimball depicts a "struggle for mastery" among the architects of the 1890s, with one group led by McKim, Mead and White declaring victory over nature and another group, defined by disciples of H. H. Richardson like Burnham, Root, and Sullivan, declaring surrender to nature. These two groups form, what Kimball refers to as, "the poles of modernism: form and function."

Kimball declares the former group of classicists triumphant, exemplified by their contributions to the Chicago World's Fair. He describes the losers as "aged and defeated, but still undaunted," perhaps ready to fight another battle.

The competition never truly ends, but Kimball attributes the last victory of the book to the monstrous growth of Manhattan. He writes, "All is exaggerated, still unordered, but intoxicating, already full of fantastic beauty."

In Manhattan, Kimball finds the beginnings of a new style. This new style will carry American architecture into the future, as a new participant in the never-ending battle of styles, and stimulate competition with other cities. He writes: "all over the land the vision of Manhattan has captured the imagination." He frames New York as a model that other cities, such as Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit, are continuously seeking to out rival.

This ongoing thread of competition and Kimball's decision to end the book with the capitalist center of Manhattan frame American architecture, and the United States more broadly, as a capitalist enterprise, guided by a free market in which the strongest style wins out.

There's definitely a social Darwinist element to this narrative that connects back to the settler colonial themes in what we have already talked about. Kimball presents America as a free open land ripe for the taking on which only the strongest will succeed.

### The Myth of Newness

While Kimball tells his story of American architecture as a continuous and unending battle of styles, of nationalities, and of architectural ideas—each seeking to embody the idea of Americanness—what it means to be "American" is not really a debate. Throughout his text, "Americanness" is consistently linked to newness: in industry, in land, in community, and in the organization of government. Listen to how many times the word "new" is used in this quote from the foreword to his book:

"Only with the founding of the Republic does a new creative spirit appear, a new sense of form. Then, as a new civilization takes shape, amid the hum of harvester and factory, a new material, steel, leaps from the earth. Its towers, rising in sunshine and storm, glowing in the night, embody the aspiration of a new world" (14).

In the context of Kimball's book, to associate America with newness is not simply a temporal distinction. Rather, newness is a social and geographical mark of difference. For Kimball, America is new because it is not old like Europe, and because America had no history prior to European settlement. Newness is an elaboration of the myth that America was formed by—as Kimball writes in the forward—"conquering the wilderness of a continent." This is the same myth that, as we discussed earlier, eliminates the accounts of people, communities, plants and animals who countered or impeded the colonial settler claims to land and capital prosperity.

We use the word 'myth' to describe Kimball's rhetoric for a couple reasons. First, in order to make clear our challenge to Kimball's claims to an authoritative history of American Architecture. Second, to recognize the association between new and America as a myth is to recognize it as having rhetorical power. This myth, like most myths, had a purpose.

Kimball was certainly not the first to use the association between new and America, but his reliance on it, and adaptation to an architectural history, can lead us to a deeper analysis of the history he constructs, and the architecture he promotes. What was the purpose of this myth in Kimball's book? What did it do for architects and for architecture as a practice and discipline?

### Labor and Status of the Architect

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## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Sidney Fiske Kimball's American Architecture*

While what it means to be “American” is certain for Kimball, the best way that architecture can embody “Americanness,” and thus materialize it, is not certain. Or at least not right away.

Hence the historical narrative within which Kimball embeds his authoritative statements about architecture, and stages the battles of styles. Within this progressive historical narrative the consistent hero is the architect. The architect is the “new creative spirit” that Kimball denominates as giving form to the Republic. The architect is the leader of civilization’s formal development towards an American ideal.

Kimball positions the architect as a leader in society, and we want to argue that this is not simply a motivational statement for working architects. Rather it can be read as a statement that asserts what the position of the architect in American society should be. By elevating the architect as creator and artist, Kimball sets them apart from replicators, reproducers, imitators—in short, laborers.

Where laborers produce, architects transform. Throughout the book, Kimball uses a poetic rhetoric to bring the work of architects into the foreground, and to depersonalize/erase the human labor of building. Though at first his writing can sound poetic, we shouldn’t take this feeling of ‘artistry’ at its face value. Listen again to the quote from the forward and notice how actions are presented:

“Only with the founding of the Republic does a new creative spirit appear, a new sense of form. Then, as a new civilization takes shape, amid the hum of harvester and factory, a new material, steel, leaps from the earth. Its towers, rising in sunshine and storm, glowing in the night, embody the aspiration of a new world” (14).

The hum of harvester and factory are the background to the new civilization. Steel simply leaps from the earth. The towers rise and glow without regard for the forces of nature. In this new society the materials and objects of production are assembled and animated as though they do not require human actors. They are set in motion and given purpose, not by any material source of energy – rather they come to life through the “new creative spirit,” who is of course, the architect.

Through the work of Adrienne Brown we can see that this distinction between manual labor and creative work was not only a mark of class difference, but also of race. Brown investigates William Starrett’s monograph titled *Skyscrapers and the Men who Build Them*, published in 1928, as a site of racial and class representation that, like Kimball’s book published in the same year, carried with it the desire to elevate a profession.

William Starrett was a builder, who’s company led construction of the Empire State building. Brown observes that Starrett’s monograph featured photographs of construction sites largely absent of the immigrant, indigenous, and ethnic laborers he employed. When people are shown, they are depersonalized, blurred and made to look as though they are part of a larger machinery.

This censorship is countered by Starrett’s description of waste materials finding a good home with the “racial colonies” on the periphery of the city. Brown writes: “Race’s strategic presences and absences in *Skyscrapers* prove integral to Starrett’s efforts to portray his role as builder as something more than practical, rendering it as a practice with an aesthetic pedigree all its own.”

The title of Starrett’s book, *Skyscrapers and the Men who Build Them*, should then be understood to point to the builder, not the laborers, as the generator of the skyscraper. In this way the builder, who animates construction by means other than manual labor, is similar to Kimball’s architect. Kimball writes: “The towers thrust themselves upward, bastioned all about.” and, describing the Shelton Hotel, “In three great leaps of rhythmic height it rises, gathering in its forces for the final flights.” It is as though simply by drawing, the architect brings buildings into being.

Both the builder and the architect are grasping for a higher rung on the hierarchical ladder of capital and empire. In doing so, they redact from their story those who are less capable of ascension, or those who would hinder their own ascension. It is also notable that the appearance of clients in Kimball’s book is limited, and when they do appear they never inhibit the architect.

In Kimball’s book this is a strategy that lifts architecture from vocation to profession, and architects from servant to agent.

It is the same strategy that entreats the ‘new creative spirit’ to announce itself on the page, while the representation of physical bodies is pressed silently into the white background.

Writing History

In this podcast we have worked on deconstructing Kimball’s history of American architecture by showing how it promoted white ways of being through the myth of progress. The pages of *American Architecture* censored race and labor, extolled capitalism, and in doing so exemplified the settler colonialism that constructs both American identity and architectural history.

We are working on deconstructing this imperial history of American architecture so that new histories and stories can be constructed in its place. More attention should be paid to voices and material worlds of people who lived between the cracks of the new world narrative.

Outro

Thank you for listening! I am Carrie Bly and I am Jeremy Wolin. This show was produced for Dr. Charles Davis’s seminar, “Reconstructing a Settler Colo-





# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Sidney Fiske Kimball's American Architecture*

nal History of American Architecture" at the Princeton University School of Architecture, during the Spring 2021 semester.

The music in this podcast was "The Old Country" by Stephan Siebert, via freemusicarchive.org You can find show notes online, wherever you found this podcast.

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Sidney Fiske Kimball's American Architecture*

### Main Points

Though Kimball's book was among a wave of 1920s texts that sought to situate and define what it meant to be "American" in architecture, his method was uniquely historical. Kimball's book asserts that American architecture arose through a progressive evolution, and that it would continue to do so, even after the book was published. Our audio excavation of Kimball's book engages this history in four movements. First, by unfolding the origin story at the foundation of his history. Second, by examining the motor of his historical progression. Third and fourth, by investigating two major themes, newness and labor, that help to elevate the position of the architect as a professional. Finally, we reflect on what it means for us to re/construct a history of American architecture.

### A White Origin Story

Kimball prioritizes English and Northern European cultural and material influences by placing them at the beginning of his story of American history. They are the conquerors of the wilderness, and the originators of the wigwam constructions. They are the true ancestors of America. In contrast, the Spanish and French are considered to be late arrivals in the book, peripheral actors to the construction of the American nation, and tangential to a history of American architecture since their structures imitate those of indigenous peoples. The minimized presence of Indigenous and enslaved people in this narrative enforces the authority of settler control and progress.

### Competition feeding Capitalism

A dominant theme linked to American identity throughout Kimball's book is competition. Competition pushes progress forward, and makes sure that only the strongest will succeed. From the conquering of the wilderness forward, this theme plays out in his historical narrative via a "Battle of Styles," a polarization of modernist attitudes, erupting finally in the powerful brawn and beauty of Manhattan—a challenge to other cities' development of urban form. Kimball makes competition seem both indispensable and natural, inherent and inevitable—a necessity to achieve the highest version of American architecture. The consequence of this narrative is the elevation of capitalism as the only source of value. Those who can not compete, or who hold different values, have either earned their position at the bottom of the ladder, or are forced to leave the United States.

### The Myth of Newness

For Kimball, what it means to be "American" is not really a debate. Throughout his text, "Americanness" is consistently linked to newness, and is used as a social and geographical mark of difference. Kimball was certainly not the first to use the association between new and America, but his reliance on it perpetuates a myth that eliminates the accounts of those who countered or impeded the settler colonial claims to land and capital prosperity. We use the word 'myth' to describe Kimball's rhetoric for a couple reasons. First, in order to make clear our challenge to Kimball's claims to an authoritative history of American Architecture. Second, to recognize the association between new and America as a myth is to recognize it as having rhetorical power.

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### Writing History

The pages of *American Architecture* censored race and labor, extolled capitalism, and exemplified the settler colonialism that constructs both American identity and architectural history. We are working on deconstructing imperial histories of American architecture so that more attention can be paid to the voices and material worlds of people who have lived between the cracks of the new world narrative.